

Listening Session – Chicago – December 8, 2004
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Brief Description of Oral Presentation to be made by:
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COALITION OF LIMITED ENGLISH SPEAKING ELDERLY

Topic: Our community

Our community has changed. If we care about our commitment to our seniors, we have to change, too. In Illinois, one out of five persons age 60 and over is foreign-born. In Chicago, it's more than one out of four: 28% of Chicago's elderly are foreign-born. In Suburban Cook County, 19% are foreign-born; in DuPage County, it's 17%; Lake county – 15%; in Kane, McHenry and Kendall Counties it's 10%, and in Will & Grundy Counties, it's 9%. And in all those counties, the percent is growing.

When the Older Americans Act was passed in 1965, the Immigration Reform Act, which opened the doors to immigration, had not yet been passed. Also, the Vietnamese War had not yet resulted in a flood of refugees from Southeast Asia. Therefore, we were not used to seeing foreign-born people in our communities. Oh, sure, a few “displaced persons” who came from Europe following World War II were scattered among some communities. But, in general, the community that existed in 1965 is hardly comparable to the community that exists today. The drafters of the Older Americans Act had the 1965 community of elders in mind. Although changes have been made in the Older Americans Act, not all states have been quick to adapt them.

Earlier this year, we conducted a survey of 28 states with large numbers of immigrants and refugees. We wanted to know how their limited English proficient elders received assistance. All of the states responded that assistance was primarily through community-based ethnic agencies, and that very little of what they do for seniors is paid for with Older Americans Act funds. A few said that their mainstream providers had bilingual/bicultural staff, but it was restricted to Spanish or Russian speakers. Only two states reported that Older Americans Act funds went directly to ethnic agencies to provide Title IIIB services.

Florida, the state of the current Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Administration on Aging, may be an example for other states, including Illinois. The Florida Department of Elder Affairs distributes funding through the area agencies to ethnic agencies for case management, naturalization assistance, translation, information and assistance, and nutrition programs.

In Illinois, staff at the community-based ethnic agencies do a lot of what the case managers do, but they don't get paid for it. For example, case managers received the added responsibility of assisting CCP applicants with Medicaid applications. We've heard a lot of complaints from case managers about this added responsibility. However, I haven't heard any complaints about their having to assist persons who don't speak

English. That's because the ethnic agency staff has always done it, as a routine part of what they do to help their older people.

As we all know, our country was built by immigrants. They continue to come and are, in fact, civilizing our communities.

Because we invited and accepted these New Americans into our society, we have an obligation to include them in our Older Americans Act programs and services.